

# Elderly Dying From Falls More Often

By MIKE STOBBE

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ATLANTA -- The death rate from falling has risen dramatically for elderly people since the 1990s, said federal health officials, speculating that it's because people are living longer with chronic conditions like cancer and heart disease.

"Since people are not dying as much from chronic diseases, they're more likely to die from a fall," said Judy Stevens, an epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Falling is the 14th leading cause of death among the elderly.

But Stevens, lead author of the study reported Thursday in CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, had good news to offer too.

Women's hip fracture injury rates have dropped in recent years, probably because of osteoporosis screenings and bone-building treatments.

"I think they're strongly contributing," Stevens said.

The researchers noted a marked decline in hip fractures after 1996. One possible explanation: In 1998, the Medicare program began reimbursing doctors to do bone density screenings on elderly people, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation.

The CDC research is believed to be one of the first national studies to show a decline in hip fractures in elderly women. It also provides the newest federal data on elderly deaths from falls since 1996.

Older people fall for a variety of reasons. Like young people, sometimes they trip on something, said Dr. Jeff Lesesne, a geriatrics specialist at Atlanta's Emory University.

But he said many falls are associated with conditions of aging: vision loss; deterioration of the inner ear and other changes that affect balance; and loss of strength that prevents seniors from recovering from a stumble.

Many fall when they first stand up, Lesesne observed. Some incontinent patients slip on their own urine, he added.

CDC researchers looked at death certificate data from 1993-2003 and counted cases in which falls were listed as a primary or underlying cause of death.

They found more than 13,700 older adults died from falls in 2003. That translated to a rate of about 37 deaths per 100,000 people who were 65 and older.

The rate in 1993 was about 24 per 100,000 \_ meaning such deaths increased by 55 percent in the 10-year span.

The rate for men rose by about 45 percent in that time, from about 32 to 46 per 100,000. The rate for women rose 60 percent, from 19.5 to 31 per 100,000.

"I think it comes back to the issue of longevity. Women are living longer. There are even more frail women living to older ages than frail men," Stevens said.

The report also looked at nonfatal injuries during a smaller time frame, from 2001-05. Those too have been increasing, though at a rate of just 3 percent.

And in a separate measurement, the hospitalization rate for hip fractures fell from nearly 918 per 100,000 in 1993 to 776 per 100,000 in 2003. The decline was driven by a 21 percent reduction in hip fractures in women, researchers found.